



## **CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**Monday, 25 September 2023**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>WIRRAL ATTENDANCE SERVICE</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES &amp; EDUCATION</b>

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee with an overview of School Attendance within Wirral.

It is accepted that consistently high school attendance gives children and young people the best opportunity to learn and achieve their potential. Supporting high levels of school attendance and tackling persistent absenteeism is aligned to the Wirral Plan 2021-2026 priority "Brighter Futures" and the Children's Services Business priority to 'create a culture of inclusion and aspiration'. Achieving educational potential is linked to the Health and Wellbeing priority for the best start in life for children and young people and a key factor in reducing inequalities.

This matter affects all wards within the borough.

This is not a key decision.

### **RECOMMENDATION/S**

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is recommended to:

- 1 Exercise oversight of the development of the Wirral Attendance Service and agree to receive a further finding report from the Attendance Service.
- 2 Exercise oversight of Wirral's school attendance performance.

## **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

### **1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1.1 To ensure Members of the Children, Young People & Education Committee have the opportunity to monitor, review and challenge performance in relation to School Attendance and a greater understanding of the role of the Local Authority in relation supporting schools in improving attendance and taking action to enforce the legislation.

### **2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

- 2.1 No other options have been considered as the Wirral Attendance Service links to a range of strategic priorities keeping young people in education.

### **3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

- 3.1 Although Wirral Attendance Service, which was set up in 2019 following a review of attendance within and across the Local Authority, deals with Elective Home Education, subject of a separate report, Children Missing in Education, Child Employment, Child Performance Licenses and Chaperone Applications, for the purposes of this report the focus is on School Attendance and the work of the team in supporting schools with this and taking enforcement action.
- 3.2 The main reason for absence across Wirral continues to be illness with other unauthorised absences and unauthorised leave of absence in term time the next biggest reasons for absence. Illness was our highest reason for absence prior to the pandemic and we started to work with partners to tackle this and to support schools in challenging some of these absences just as the pandemic began. The recording of absence due to illness does not specify types of illness but anecdotally we are aware that there are more children with mental health and anxiety issues post the pandemic which is a reflection of the national picture.
- 3.3 Our Education Psychologist colleagues have been undertaking a piece of work and setting up a project focusing on Emotionally Based School Absence which it is hoped will help to support some of these young people back into school.
- 3.4 We will also be looking at a system adopted by Birmingham in relation to tackling absence from school due to illness.
- 3.5 The other unauthorised absences is a reflection of the support we have provided to schools since 2019 in challenging regular days or patterns of absence due to alleged illness. Where illness is not a factor we also encourage schools to offer support via the Early Help Advisors, Inclusion Team, Youth worker colleagues or in some cases the Safer Schools Police Officers.
- 3.6 Unauthorised leave of absence continues to be tackled with the use of enforcement processes.

- 3.7 In May 2022, following a consultation, the Department for Education published new guidance in relation to school attendance, Working Together to Support School Attendance. Whilst this is only guidance at the moment, it is anticipated that once parliamentary time allows, it will become statutory.
- 3.8 The new guidance identifies responsibilities for both schools and Local Authorities.
- 3.9 In terms of ensuring that we fulfil our responsibilities under the new guidance, the Attendance Service allocates a Locality Attendance Officer to each school regardless of the school status although we still need work with the Independent Schools to fully engage with them. As well as working with individual schools, the Locality Attendance Officers will also bring clusters of schools together to share good practice, information about common barriers to attendance and updates.
- 3.10 The Locality Attendance Officers will hold a termly conversation with every school to identify, discuss and signpost or provide access to services for pupils who are persistently or severely absent or at risk of becoming so. Persistent absentees are those young people with attendance of 90% and below. Severely absentees are those with attendance below 50%. Regular attendance, as defined by the Supreme Court in 2017 is “in accordance with the rules prescribed by the school” interpreted by many as in effect being every day that the school requires the child to attend. Like many Local Authorities, we are still working on what this termly conversation should look like although our Locality Attendance Officers are in most schools at least termly.
- 3.11 Whilst we have done some presentations to Children’s Services colleagues, we are yet to roll this out across the wider council to ensure attendance is a key feature of all frontline council services.
- 3.12 The team regularly use data to identify schools requiring greatest support and also to compare absence codes across schools. Unauthorised leave of absence in term time (holidays) and illness are our main reasons for absence.
- 3.13 Where children are not able to attend school due to health reasons, the Attendance Service links in with the Home & Continuing Education Service and advises them on actions to take if young people are not engaging with them. The Attendance Service Manager also sits on the Wirral Hospital School Admissions panel.
- 3.14 Some young people, either due to a medical reason or as part of a re-integration plan or for limited other reasons, are only able to attend school part-time. For these young people, the Attendance Service asks schools to complete a part-time timetable form which is signed by the school and parent and the details are recorded on Liquidlogic.
- 3.15 The Attendance Service Leadership meet regularly with the SEND Parent Carers Partnership Wirral to discuss attendance related issues. The Service also links in with the Care Navigators from CAMHS, Early Help Advisors, 0 – 19 service to ensure there is joined up support for families.
- 3.16 Where the offer of support is not working, being engaged with or appropriate, we enforce attendance through legal intervention (including prosecution as a last resort).

Our template letter for schools to use to invite parents to school attendance panel meetings include links to Family Toolbox, Zillo etc so they can access help regardless of whether they engage in those meetings. Where parents fail to engage in those meetings with schools, we do issue warning letters and subsequently penalty notices. Where penalty notices remain unpaid after 28 days we do prosecute.

- 3.17 Even, when considering prosecution, we continue to signpost parents to appropriate support services and, on some occasions, will adjourn or withdraw cases to allow time to see how parents engage with services.
- 3.18 In addition to the work of the Virtual School, the Locality attendance Officers also meet regularly with social care colleagues to discuss those young people where attendance is a concern. These discussions take place, informally or more formally at Child in Need meetings, Core Groups or our CME25 meeting.
- 3.19 Following the introduction of the guidance in May 2022, the Department for Education have had Attendance Advisors working with Local Authorities to see where they are in terms of implementing the new guidance. When we were visited by our allocated Advisors in February 2023, she was satisfied that we were in a good position for implementing the guidance and aware of our next steps. She continues to support us in compiling an action plan and overall strategy.
- 3.20 In addition to the Attendance Advisor visit, we were also visited by the Attendance Policy Team Leader from the Department for Education. During his visit he met with various members of the team and discussed topics such as data, enforcement, multi-agency working and also observed part of our 360 Attendance Review in a secondary school. He, like the Attendance Advisor, was also impressed with the work we are doing in Wirral to improve school attendance.
- 3.21 Following this second visit, we were asked to accompany the DfE to the North West Directors of Childrens' Services meeting to talk about how we have taken steps to implement the new guidance.
- 3.22 The 360 Attendance Review, observed by the DfE Attendance Policy Team Leader was one of a number of these that have been undertaken since two of the team came up with the idea in the Spring of 2021 as we came out of the pandemic. These reviews involve 2 or 3 members of the team spending a morning in a school meeting with various members of staff, talking to pupils and observing how pupils are greeted as they arrive, how registration is undertaken and the profile of attendance throughout the school. Prior to the visit checks are also done in relation to information available on the school website and relevant data is obtained. Following the visit, a written report is produced for schools within two weeks. This report includes observations and recommendations.
- 3.23 Wirral Attendance Service has access to a number of sources of data in relation to attendance. The team work closely with colleagues in the Children's Systems Team and Software Support to ensure that data is regularly imported or sent in from schools to be added into council systems. Occasionally there are issues with this when a school changes provider of systems. A recent example of the three teams working together has been in relation to supporting Progress School so that their

attendance can be shared with LA systems. This involved the school changing provider and then setting up the appropriate systems and file transfers.

- 3.24 In addition to the regular import or sending of data to the Local Authority, 97% of Wirral schools are currently signed up to the Department for Education Daily Attendance collection. Nationally there are only 83% of schools signed up. This collection of data allows schools to see their own reports and compare themselves. In addition it also allows us to have a regular review of how we are doing overall compared to national and regional figures.
- 3.25 In addition to these sources of data, the team also access the data from the Department for Education termly census although there is always a delay in this data being available.
- 3.26 In terms of comparison with national and regional data, the latest figures from the DfE daily collections show that our primary attendance is 0.2 below National and 0.4 below the North West. Secondary attendance is 0.6 and 0.7 below respectively and Special School attendance is the same as North West and 0.1 below National.
- 3.27 Our persistent absence figures, up to 14<sup>th</sup> July 2023, in comparison with National and North West figures show that our Primary persistent absence is 0.7 worse than National and 1.2% worse than North West. Secondary persistent absence is 0.5% worse than National and 1.1% worse than North West. Our Special School persistent absence is better than both National and North West by 0.8% and 0.4%.
- 3.28 Further comparisons of attendance data are contained within appendix 4 along with data on part-time timetables and our enforcement action.
- 3.29 In addition to using the data to support individual schools and to compare ourselves against national, North West and other local authority figures, attendance data is also used in the banding of schools by our School Improvement colleagues.
- 3.30 In terms of our enforcement action, this is reported annually to the Department for Education in the autumn term based on the figures for previous academic year.
- 3.31 The number of penalty notices issued in the last three recorded years are:

	Academic year 21/22	Academic year 20/21	Academic year 18/19
North West	43516	8385	55206
Wirral	1639	447	1338
Liverpool	1714	340	3025
Sefton	1878	260	1106
Knowsley	174	22	938
St Helens	285	25	336
Halton		95	747

- 3.32 We continue to see more consistency across the borough with the use of penalty notices by schools which results in increased numbers of requests. In the current academic year, we have issued 2515 penalty notices within the region of a further 600 requests still to be processed as of 31<sup>st</sup> July.

#### **4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

#### **5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. However, this report demonstrates how the Local Authority fulfils its responsibility in ensuring that all young people are receiving an education.

#### **6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS**

6.1 There are none arising from this report.

#### **7.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

7.1 Whilst we have had positive feedback from the DfE in relation to the work we are doing around Attendance, the fact that our attendance figures are lower than national and our Persistent absence figures are higher than national may pose a risk to the outcome of any inspection. The potential risk factors are linked to pupil outcomes due to lost learning and greater demand on other services e.g Social Care further down the line and a possible increase in the number of families going through the enforcement pathway.

#### **8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

8.1 Wirral Attendance Service meets regularly with Parent Carers Partnership Wirral in relation to SEND and Attendance issues and we have adapted paperwork as a result of some of these conversations to ensure that we capture the SEND status of young people who may be on a reduced timetable, or a young person whose parents have been referred in for enforcement action.

#### **9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision, or activity. There are no equality issues arising from this report.

#### **10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 There are no significant environment and climate implications arising out of the report.

## 11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no community wealth implications arising from the report.

**REPORT AUTHOR:**   **Name: Damian Stormont**  
Attendance Manager  
email: damianstormont@wirral.gov.uk

## APPENDICES

- Appendix 1 Wirral Attendance Service Structure
- Appendix 2 DfE guidance – Working Together to Improve School Attendance
- Appendix 3 Summary Table of responsibilities for School Attendance
- Appendix 4 Attendance Service Performance Report
- Appendix 5 Attendance Policy
- Appendix 6 Penalty Notice Procedures
- Appendix 7 Enforcement Procedures

## TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Children, Young People and Education Committee in accordance with section a of its Terms of Reference:

1. Exercising management, oversight and delivery of services to children and young people in relation to their care, wellbeing, education or health, with the exception of any powers reserved to full Council.

## BACKGROUND PAPERS

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/access-your-school-attendance-data>

## SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date